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the sea decides

Joanne Leow
University of Saskatchewan

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JOANNE LEOW

the sea decides

*webbed up here by the sewer
sewn to the hardness of cement
—Arthur Yap, “public beach”*

Forgetting comes with the tide. You are sitting on a concrete breakwater watching the sea come in. At this hour, it is a gray-black churn, lit with the orange lights of ships and tankers. You have almost forgotten what you once looked like. You don’t remember why you are here or what day it is. You do not even remember your name. Focusing on the sound of the waves, their elliptical repetitions, you begin to forget the sandy, grassy path that you walked to arrive at this vantage point.

What you do know is that all this used to be under the water, under the sea. This land is new; you feel its tenuousness through your body.

Soon it will be time to leave again, to return to the beginning, having tried on a different skin. You turn to the woman sitting beside you, to the profile of her unrecognizable face. You open your mouth to speak before your words themselves are lost. You only manage to say,

the sea . . .

And she replies,

. . . decides.

*

You’ve always been unsure of yourself in this country, in this particular iteration. You’ve never been able to pinpoint the reason why. But all this preoccupation with figures, results, averages, and scores has always left you confused. You’ve learned that humans consist of a specific percentage of water. But what does the figure matter? Each person holds a different amount of water that you have learned to see. They hide it in the spaces between their joints, their organs, their veins, and their voices. Their bodies feel so solid and yet you know—grasping a hand, a shoulder, a face—how much water is waiting there.

So, it begins with numbers: a phone number, a house address, a price, an interest rate, a lottery sequence. The digits start to misplace themselves, rearrange themselves, slipping out. You learn to cope by saying them out loud, hearing your own voice repeat each numeral like a mantra as you tap it into a keypad or wander down an unfamiliar road

looking for an apartment. Simple calculations have to be pencilled on scraps of paper. What then of stocks, shares, dividends, profits? What then of birth statistics, divorce rates, growth figures, cut-off points?

Human lovers are not numbers. They are, perhaps, the opposite of numbers. You try to remember this as you look at her face. You do not remember how you got here or how you will return to a rumpled bed beside another stranger. In his sleep he will turn, hook his ankle over yours, a catch.

Much better to follow this narrow path out again to the sea, listening to the tide's regular irregularity, like a failing heart.

*

You remember that this key goes into this ignition. You remember to adjust the mirrors that tell you who is behind you, who is beside you. You remember the sensation of this leather seat on the back of your legs, and how exactly the small of your back fits against its contours. As you put your foot to a pedal and the vehicle shudders to a start, you imagine what it might feel like to simply let the car drift off the road, past these painted lines and railings. That terrible desire to employ a thing for uses other than what it has been built for. All that engineered metal, stuffing, plastic, wiring, and digital screens. Built with so much water and yet containing so little. All designed for speed, efficiency, and what the humans call a certain brand of pleasure.

You recall then other pleasures, those afternoons where no one thought to look for the both of you. How you met this latest one when she was just another salesgirl in a downtown boutique tucked into the bottom of a skyscraper. How you returned again and again to the same cool rooms of the store, each dress she laid out for you fitting just so. Her hair sleek in spite of the humidity outside. Her wrist brushing against the hem of your skirt as she bent to adjust the fabric.

You lower the windows; the air is thick, but you smell the sea. Opening the car door, you slip out of the machine and into the car park. Its concrete echoes are not where you want to be. You start walking towards the water; you begin to remember why it is you have always been drawn to the sea.

*

You take off your shoes and let the soles of your feet sink into the warm sand. The light is turning golden but this is no pristine beach. A tattered plastic bag, a condom wrapper, a drink can, an assortment of cigarette butts, and other remnants of human contact litter the sliver of shoreline. In the distance, across the water, you make out oil tankers and sand dredgers. Even this late in the day, the horizon is still a hazy line of heat.

You remember why you keep returning here: to forget yourself. Your other lives, affairs, entanglements. Nothing matters in the face of this water, this sea. She is waiting for you in the warm water. She saw you for what you really are in that store, on that street, in that

room, on that bed. She felt the water under your skin as she traced a line between your clavicle and your hip, your hip to your anklebone. That salt water waiting to spill out.

You walk slowly into the sea; her voice calls from the waves. The water is murky at first, but clarifies as you begin to transform into something you have always been.

*

After it happened, no one could tell you where they had been when the sea decided to breach almost a century's worth of the island's slow progress against the tide.

No city planner, no structural engineer, no visionary, no surveyor could have predicted how high the water would rise. The beachcombers felt it first, the currents that brought the refuse, the seaweed, the coconut husks, the syringes, the plastic ties, the driftwood to their ankles continued their slow, implacable movement inland. No rushing out of tide in its usual rhythms, no receding past carefully laid markers.

The water rose imperceptibly, inch by inch along the beaches of imported sand, washing away millions of dollars of white softness. It welled up in the modern glass and steel coastal properties, inundating their polished hardwood floors, the marbled staircases, the manicured lawns. It made luxury yachts bob precariously among expensive cars.

The sea's rise was hypnotic and slow. It lulled the island-state's usual knee-jerk efficiencies; its deployments and drills for scenarios, sieges, and other contingencies could not have predicted this unhurried violence. The salt water returned like a forgotten lover to the settled land, superseding the topographical lines, the constantly updated maps, the hyperlinked plans, the satellite views, the new technologies. Uncountable reams of data and investment were rendered obsolete over the course of a few days and weeks.

When the water finally stopped, just at the curb of the old coastal roads, the debris it had collected settled in a line. Beyond, the sea lay pristine and calm.

JOANNE LEOW is an assistant professor in the Department of English at the University of Saskatchewan. Her academic writing on transnational, diasporic, and Asian literature has been published in the *Journal of Asian American Studies* and *Canadian Literature*, among other venues. Her creative writing has been published in anthologies, *Ricepaper*, *Catapult*, and the *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*. Her current projects include a book manuscript on urban planning, authoritarianism, and contemporary Singapore texts, and a SSHRC-funded project on the contested urban coastlines of Hong Kong, Vancouver, and Singapore.